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TAGS: ELAB EPET PGOV PHUM SOCI NI XY
SUBJECT: NIGERIA: TALK OF "MASS PROTESTS" ON FUEL
DEREGULATION

REF: (A) LAGOS 2081 (B) ABUJA 1737 (C) LAGOS 2147

LABOR AND CIVIL SOCIETY MAY DEMONSTRATE AGAIN

(SBU) 1. The Labor and Civil Society Coalition (LASCO) held a press conference on October 23 and accused the GON and oil marketers of breaking an agreement reached between the parties on October 8. (Refs A, B) National Labour Congress (NLC) officials told us that new organized mass action is planned for November. 16. LASCO members have scheduled a meeting to mobilize supporters early in the week of October 27. Surprisingly, the word "strike" has not been used in formal or informal documents from LASCO regarding the planned mobilization. Leaders have used the phrase "mass protest" instead.

(SBU) 2. Bamidele Aturu, President of the United Action for Democracy (UAD) and Co-Chairman of LASCO, told POLOFF on October 23 that a final decision on the "mass protest" would be made at a meeting next week. Aturu explained that LASCO officials favor democratic processes and seek broad member support prior to approving any action. Aturu was critical of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) and of its move to increase the price of fuel in its depots from N28 to N33, just below the agreed upon retail price of N34. He accused the GON and oil marketers of operating with "impunity" and asserted that the GON is obligated to regulate the price of fuel for the welfare of the people. A LASCO press release stated that the GON's policy of deregulation is "totally unacceptable," arguing that petroleum products "are so crucial to the well-being of the individual and the nation that their supply and distribution cannot be left to the whims and caprices of marketers and market prices."

(SBU) 3. Except for some NLC officials, however, many LASCO leaders argue that the current confrontation with GON transcends fuel deregulation and addresses the very nature of Nigerian democracy itself (Ref C). Aturu, for example, bemoaned the lack of a "democracy dividend" and said: "we didn't fight the military regime for bad government, corruption, and insecurity." (Comment. UAD, an umbrella organization for many human rights groups, was last nationally active during the Abacha military regime and was responsible for organizing the "Five Million Man March" on Lagos to protest that regime. End Comment)

GON DELAYS PROMISED CIVIL SERVANT SALARY INCREASE

(SBU) 4. Adding fuel to the fire, the GON has put off to October the retroactive 12.5% salary increase it promised for July to public sector workers. The GON justified the move expressing concern about the inflationary impact of paying four months of salary arrears. NLC officials countered that fuel deregulation has

already caused "inflationary damage," and confided to us that the NLC still plans to direct its efforts to fuel deregulation. Other civil society contacts also voiced their concerns to PolOff that the burden of increased fuel prices is too onerous for a population whose income has remained stagnant for years.

(SBU) 5. COMMENT: The NLC remains the power broker in LASCO and has drummed up enthusiasm within civil society on the issue of fuel deregulation. This enthusiasm appears to reflect a strong desire to use the fuel issue to address the myriad of other problems civil society sees in the nascent Nigerian democracy. However, much of the general public passion that was palpable just before the planned strike and protests of early October has dissipated, and LASCO may have a hard row to hoe to reinvigorate the Nigerian public into mass protest action over fuel deregulation. The oft brought up grievance of civil society remains the federal government's perceived unwillingness to implement policy within the institutions of a democratic system and to consult civil society before taking actions that affect society at all levels.

GREGOIRE